

2005 AmeriCorps Launch

Member Reflections

Day One - Sept. 28

The 2005 Kentucky AmeriCorps Launch was a huge success. The three-day training event began with AmeriCorps 101, a panel discussion on program basics and organization. Members of the panel were Victoria Wysel, a current AmeriCorps*VISTA member with the Franklin County United Way; Shannon Bailes, former AmeriCorps member and current KY-READS program director; Jake Mercier, former AmeriCorps*NCCC member and current director of the Getting Things Done for Kentucky's Homeless program; and Eileen Latham, director of Senior Corps for the Bluegrass Community Action Agency.

Missy Wilburn, a first-year member with the Kentucky Youth Leadership Corps, said the panel helped members understand the big Kentucky AmeriCorps picture and the role members play.

Beth Eaton, a first-year Student Service Consortium Center member said, "Seeing the different branches of AmeriCorps and hearing what each of them does helped me understand just how important we are. We all have different roles, but we're all working for the same cause. The possibilities are endless."

Connie Callahan, Ph.D. led a planning session on working with people in poverty. The session was well received by AmeriCorps members who said it gave them greater insight into the issue. First-year SSCC member Michelle Hoskins said, "Now I know about how the different economic classes perceive the world around them."

An evening ice cream social gave members a chance to meet and socialize and many said they enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to network and establish ties with other members. Second-year SSCC member Jennifer Brown said the launch was valuable to her for many reasons, not the least of which was the chance to better know her program director. Another SSCC program member, Beth Eaton, said the launch helped her see the dedication of program directors first hand.

First-year Senior Connections member Megan Johnson also enjoyed bonding with other AmeriCorps members and said she learned a lot from both launch presenters and other members.

Day Two - Sept. 29

The second day of the launch gave members a chance to select the sessions they attended, a change from previous launch formats. Nathan Jones, a second-year homeless program member, said the launch was "on target" in terms of its appeal to members and be offering a wide array of session topics that addressed members' needs and interests. More than one returning member said they liked the new agenda format and the chance to choose the sessions they attended.

A workshop on methamphetamine manufacturing and use in Kentucky, led by Cheyenne Albro, director of the Pennyrile Narcotics Task Force, was an eye-opener for many members and

became a popular topic of conversation for the duration of the launch. Jessica Darnall, a first-year member with KY-READS, admitted that she wasn't aware of the extent of methamphetamine use in Kentucky. "I came away from his presentation with more knowledge about the drug, a better understanding of the people who use it and why they continue to do so," she said.

The presentation offered tips on recognizing the signs and symptoms of methamphetamine exposure in children. Hoskins said that information will be important as she tutors Kentucky students. Former deputy sheriff Sandra Arison, a first year member with the Green River Area Development District Homeland Security program, said she was surprised and impressed by the information provided at the session.

William Thames, Ph.D. of Eastern Kentucky University gave an impressive presentation on the U.S. and Kentucky Constitutions. Angie Poynter, first-year SSCC member, said Dr. Thames' passion for history brought his stories to life. "Since I am not from Kentucky, it was good to know about the people from Kentucky who made an impact on our nation," she said.



Leadership skills and teambuilding workshops with Mike King were well-attended and remained topics of discussion long after the sessions adjourned. Arison said the teambuilding workshop was one of her favorites. "[King] kept every student laughing while learning valuable information at the same time," she said.

Eaton said two workshops she found especially informative were Recognizing Child Abuse, led by Natalie Kelly with the CHFS Division of Child Abuse and Domestic Violence Services and Rashmi Adi-Brown of Prevent Child Abuse Kentucky, and Fayette County schools' special education director Peggy Blanton's session titled Working with People with Learning Disabilities. Poynter, too, said information from the child abuse workshop will be valuable to her as a reading tutor.

Other workshops included Homeless Issues, by Judy Levey, executive director for the Homeless and Housing Coalition of Kentucky; Aging Services in Kentucky and Baby Boomer Generation, by Bill Cooper, director of the CHFS Division of Aging Services; and Grant Writing, by KCCVS commissioner Phyllis Culp.

Darnall enjoyed the interactive aspects of some workshops that engaged members as part of the presentations. Michelle Kitchen, a first-year member of Kentucky's Promise Corps, said session presenters clearly related to the members' and their desire to succeed in their assignments. "They reinforced the notion that even if we thought that we had failed or not made a difference, that we did make a difference just by trying," she said.

Day Three - Sept. 30

On the final day of the launch, King led a closing session that predicted the new AmeriCorps class will accomplish wonderful things during their year of service. He used a colorful analogy comparing an AmeriCorps member's service to Dorothy's journey down the yellow brick road in *The Wizard of Oz*. He emphasized



that the real story was not found in, along or even at the end of the yellow brick road, but in the characters met along the way.

After the closing session, members headed to the state Capitol for the induction and swearing-in ceremony. Addressing members at the ceremony were KCCVS Chairman Pat Hargadon; CHFS Department for Human Support Services Commissioner Marla Montell; and Cabinet Secretary James W. Holsinger, M.D.



The ceremony began with the traditional and joyful march up the Capitol steps. Members marched with their fellow program members, each group distinguished by a hand-crafted program banner. First-year SSCC member Kathy Bennett said, "[I] did not realize how many AmeriCorps members are at work in the Commonwealth of Kentucky."

Other members gave the program rave reviews. Robert Bailey, second-year Senior Connections member, led the Pledge of Allegiance, which he characterized as the launch event he most enjoyed. CHFS staff member Jim Wurtsmith led the singing for the national anthem and My Old Kentucky Home and members of the Department of Juvenile Justice Cadet Leadership Education Program served as the color guard.

Holsinger administered the oath of service to program directors and members. Bennett said the ceremony was deeply meaningful to her and gave her a tremendous sense of pride and purpose. Jen Posey, a first-year member with the homeless program said, "[I] never felt so proud to be a part of something." But, she admitted, "It was a bit overwhelming."

Members shared a picnic lunch following the ceremony and before heading home to begin their year of service to their communities. Pride and joy among members, program directors, commissioners and staff were evident in the smiles and tears that have also become a launch tradition.

Hoskins summed up her experience by saying, "although I am only one, I am a part of many."